

Notes for a lecture on Postmodernism

SFSU Nov 89

Course title: Media and Social Change

assigned text:

Jameson, Postmodernism, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism

key question:

If the analysis of Postmodernism is correct, what does that say about media and social change? my conclusion will address this

key opening questions

Is the art/culture of the present different than the art/culture of the past (ie first half of 20th C)

Is contemporary consciousness different than consciousness in the past?

my answer to both is yes...what's important is how the current scene differs.

But this also implies the need for a new strategy in terms of art and media and social change.

Some remarks on my writings (read earlier in this course)

Working Class Heroes.

An attempt to explain in a sympathetic way why certain films appeal to a working class audience (and don't appeal to a middle class one).

1. getting beyond judgement and instant dismissal of "lower" popular culture
 - a. from the high culture position
 - b. from the working class/lower middle class position (I already understand it, why should I study it? it is transparent to me, whereas high culture isn't.)
2. attempt to explain audience response with a sociological specification of white working class male consciousness (by reading lit on white working class)
3. still valid in certain ways, could be extended to action films, applies to sports
 - a. example of Pete Rose, the remarkable athlete, the achilles heel of gambling and extreme pride, self-delusion.
 - b. film, MEN MEN MEN (much on sunday tv images)

Notes on Melodrama

again, taking up a downgraded form usually dismissed (soap opera, weepies, etc.) and trying to take seriously its appeal

and connecting that to a sociological/marxist-feminist analysis of the the nature of the family under capitalism

similarly, Lesage on Christian TV: not that it is ideologically good, but why is it appealing to so many? what is the appeal of the religious and conservative Right? how do they try to persuade people, why have they been successful at

using the media, what are the limitations of what they are doing? What can feminists and leftists learn from this?

segue/

this is the progressive side of asking the question, but it can be asked from other perspectives:

Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas*. 1972. Taking a long serious look at LV architecture--the complete antithesis of high modernist elite architecture, and then taking it seriously: argument that for all it's gaudiness, it is functional and enjoyable, it doesn't demand that you stand in awe of it, you can have a different relation to it...fun, entertainment (which is what LV is about anyway).

the tension in analysis, once you get beyond high culture moralism and dismissal of mass culture: between

it's fun, people can make what they want of it, lighten up, it's democratic and good

and

there may be something we want to question here, but we need to understand it before we pass judgement on it.

this is the current debate that is going on in the analysis of the mass culture audience

(will return to this point)

Defining Postmodernism

1. the term is now so widely used that it has been taken up in commercials, ads, MTV, etc. as well as by theorists...it loses its theoretical "punch" in the process.

ask: what is Postmodern MTV, what is shown in that slot?

work that doesn't quite fit into other market categories: not heavy metal, mainstream rock, r&b/soul, rap, etc. Kind of post new wave, a little arty. The visuals are usually artier, a bit less on the performers per se (but they are not star/celebrities yet)

2. The way that Jameson initially defines it is essentially negative (sees it basically as embodying a loss, a loss of the critical function of high modernist art) But, Jameson's essay is somewhat confused and confusing about this matter (will discuss later). So, I'll start with my own definition.

postmodernism

If we need a general name for the art of our time, across the different arts, then p-m will do. However, then it is larger than a movement. But in any strict sense, we'd have to say it is simply a later phase of Romanticism (Romanticism being the general framework for art in the Bourgeois/Capitalist era)

being after modernism

1. vs. eclecticism (19th C. vice--the cluttered Victorian look), for the clean, machine age, Bauhaus, form follows function

2. novelty and originality, always avant garde, an art that looks to the future

3. reject decoration, ornament; for geometric, clear

4. vs. national, regional, vernacular, for the international and cosmopolitan

5. art of the future and better society--would affect society (but fundamentally elitist--intellectuals will decide)

example: Le Courbusier housing blocks

postmod

characteristics:

1. plurality of styles, hybrid, eclecticism
2. recycling of styles, "retro style"; quotations, collage, parody, pastiche
3. ornament and decoration
4. mix high and low culture, assumes various responses from general public and those "in the know" [a kind of irony] but makes work accessible to both this is, however, a willingness of high culture to absorb low culture; low culture does not take on high culture in the same way.
5. concern with meaning, statement (art can communicate, this should be a concern of the artist)
6. "intertextuality" constant reference to the world of art, of media itself, as an artificial but real part of existence. Art and discourse structure the way we understand the world of "the Real". Out there is in here.

a text to work from: Bruce Connor, **A Movie**

an example of Pop Art (like Warhol)

1. easy to look at, recognizable
2. comic, (ironic, parodistic)
3. a celebration of commercial-industrial culture

4. gets beyond the rarified high culture area
5. shows the world of the already mediated, the world presented to us as media--gives it to us with a deadpan response (that then becomes a moral-ethical stance).

SHOW

1. a broad and wide appeal
2. anti-sentimentalism (but has its own form--nostalgia)
3. works through displacement and recontexting
4. a certain coolness against the ruptured surface technique (severe montage)
5. not about the found object from the past, about "time" because it is definately placed in the present, the now.

Pop--political or not? Warhol--Coca-cola, same beverage for President and common person, a kind of democracy of consumption

Pop can make a comment:

show clip from Anger, **Scorpio Rising**. A comment on masculinity, (gay masculine images, but also a joke on all men) and also a comment on mass culture images (and music)...this is "political" in being a comment on the culture and symbols of power in a culture. (thesis: in advanced capitalism, such a politics is a pre-requisite to a politics which effectively takes on production and the state).

the argument against such an analysis (by both the committed left and the burnedout former left a la Baudrillard) is thatsuch dissent is simply a drop in the

ocean--it goes back into the ocean of media images and is lost as more washes over consciousness.

The problem for the political artist:

--what common basis do people share that you can use for making a statement?

--can you avoid sentimentalism which simply calls for a re-fabricated automatic emotion? how? icons of our time--the nuclear mushroom cloud, the space shuttle, a few bars of a song to evoke a decade (Charleston for 20s, etc.)

--what use or possibility is there for recycling images and still saying something if these images are already over-produced?

is there, finally, a watering down of appropriated image material?

how and why are images/sounds owned? what is the nature of copyright, "intellectual property" What do we do in an age of digital reproduction technology?

Jameson's essay

1. inconsistent--clearly prejudiced against postmodernism at start, yet at end claims we shouldn't be moralistic in understanding it
2. actually part of a book he writes throughout the 80s; typical of J, his early drafts are filled with flakey comments (Beatles and Stones as "high modernist")
3. argument is incomplete
4. but it is an important essay (in its different versions) because many people were influenced by it and commented upon it, in that sense it did what he wanted it to do--provide a political intervention for left cultural criticism in the current

understanding of art; it also is important for existing in (implied) response to certain arguments in continental social/political analysis (eg Lyotard, Baudrillard)

although I would argue that it is in the area of visual art criticism that the most interesting and sophisticated understanding develops of the same phenomenon, and in large part that is because there are artists who are producing interesting and challenging work within a post modern vein that is political (developed at end) Godard remains the pioneering example of this.

Jameson

show slides

Van Gogh **Peasant Shoes** vs. Warhol **Diamond Dust Shoes**

briefly describe--VG several studies of details, (the "close up" before cinema exists) of realist metonymy (part for whole) actually it makes more sense to place this within a realist aesthetic than a "modernist" one, but Jameson is a sloppy art critic/historian; but won't grant this to Warhol (actually at least 3 versions of DDS) (surface textured with Diamond dust) but it doesn't fit a realist pattern, but it does fit a post modern pattern. (it's also playing with surface texture (as did abstract impressionists) and punning with a certain self-referentially (diamond dust as industrial byproduct, also as valuable commodity, but then here treated without reverence for its supposed commodity rareness, but just a textural appropriation--a comment on the art market as well) that Warhol understood perfectly as an artist working in the realm of celebrity--his work could only be known within the context of his work.

J's nostalgia for realism--he reads the VG image from its (supposed) context

intentional, biographical criticism (it expresses work, labor, peasant life) (although from a strict art historical view we know that these are shoes that he bought from a peddler and himself walked around in to get muddy) J doesn't see how much he is buying into the "myth" of VG in interpreting the image but he can't accept the high heel shoes of Warhol as icons of anything but to apply the same biographical/intentional criticism to Warhol we'd have to see it as a motif of his career, and also place it as a contemporary icon for female glamour (MTV, etc.) in other words, advertising and mass culture images are part of our context in the contemporary world so, Jameson's ability to read a political meaning in Peasant Shoes is essentially an allegorical reading, a reading done by taking information from outside the work and applying it to the work; but he denies any allegorical reading to Warhol (though we could obviously make one up--even a political allegory)

Thus, J's argument that there is a "waning of affect" (decrease in expressive emotion, in other words a "coolness"--as in cool Jazz of 50s) in postmodern work is in part dependent on a highly prejudicial self selection of work to discuss. And his other terms at this point are also highly charged with value judgement: Pastiche over Parody, Historicism or the "neo" over History (a sense of historical development); the Nostalgia mode, the loss of the past, the breakdown in the signifying chain producing "schizophrenic" art, the "Hysterical sublime" etc. At this point, I'd argue, Jameson is just tossing concepts around without really being rigorous--this is one of his biggest flaws as a critic--the tendency to bullshit when he really hasn't done his homework; a certain male privilege in getting away with it.

and also a mark that he really doesn't have peers in either marxist literary criticism (who could call him on it) or for that matter in conservative or liberal circles (where his intellectual peers lack J's wide ranging comparative literature sweep of imagination). This is the problem then with Andrew Britton's response to Jameson (which is later in this course).

Jameson argues that we are now in a different phase of capitalism: multinational capitalism, or post-industrial (service sector in the capitalist core; industrial/agricultural labor in the developing world) marked by a strong consumer culture in the capitalist core. We can quibble about details, but basically I think he's right--certain aspects of international capitalism are stronger than nation-states, and this seems to imply a different kind of political struggle than just taking state power following a Leninist model (this is a big discussion I can't get into here) in the capitalist core.

Britton is so nit-picking that he loses any sense of what the big question is and just becomes a snide and self-defeating critic (eg "mr." as a sneer to his opponents): Britton doesn't want to see that it is precisely the problems with traditional Marxist criticism that leave it with nothing to say on any level of cultural intervention in the contemporary art world or critical/intellectual world. Jameson at least is addressing the issue, Britton (while I would agree with him on numerous specific points) has nothing to offer someone who wants to make art and change the world in our present world.

Thus at the end Jameson does come around to trying to deal with the present, and this is in his discussion of the Bonaventure Hotel in LA. (ask who's seen it; equivalent buildings in other cities, in SF?) He sees this building as presenting a

new and difficult way of seeing, sensing, experiencing space, a way that abolishes critical distance,. and then he argues that we may need a new kind of cognitive mapping to understand this new already existing but not yet understood space, the space of the new city.

What he doesn't allow for, however, is that it may simply be that Fred Jameson, verbal intellectual, literary critic, has this problem and that other people don't--in other words it may be that people with a strong visual imagination don't share this dilemma of the print medium intellectual. My mother, for example, has no particular problem negotiating such "postmodernist" buildings and spaces once she takes a little time to look them over--eg new United terminal at O'Hare, State of Illinois building, Hyatt Regency, etc etc. Nor did she have much of a problem understanding MTV: the first time she saw music videos she thought they were confusing, but then on her own she figured out, after watching three or four of them, that they were "telling little stories" and "using trick photography" as she put it, and then watched them without any cognitive problems.

It seems to me that part of the problem with Jameson is that he lives on the other side of the tv generation, and this is something that decisively marks intellectuals in trying to deal with mass culture today. I grew up with tv, I experienced adolescence via rock and roll on a transistor radio, I love to "graze" television by using the remote control to flip channels through cable tv. My experience of the world is different from that of previous generations as a result.

there has been a change in consciousness: example of change from print culture (he said, I said) to visual culture (he goes, I'm like) (elaborate with dramatic examples)

So, speaking as an artist, as a film and video maker, I can only be a postmodernist--that is the idiom of my time, of my imagination is one in which Postmodernism is the "cultural dominant" as Jameson argues. But I don't think that then keeps me from making political art. It just means I'll make it in a way that works with the (mediated) reality I have to work with.

So, to turn the criticism around. we need to look at Jameson from the point of view of what he most decisively leaves out:

he doesn't discuss women or female artists much less feminism or feminist artists--though they are certainly significant (as post mod eg Laurie Anderson; as political, Barbara Kruger)

he doesn't discuss race or ethnic issues in contemporary culture

he doesn't deal with gay/lesbian/bi or other gender issues

he doesn't deal with the Third World or imperialism

he doesn't deal with anti-nuclear issues or the ecology/green movement

he doesn't deal with youth culture (except in a few tangential remarks)

not the topics of the traditional left: the labor movement, electoral politics

(nor does Andrew Britton in his critique of Jameson)

so, there's a certain way in which Jameson also seems to be erecting the notion of postmodernism as an area of political critical concern as a way of avoiding precisely those social and political movements which are most active and engaged at the very time he is writing...here we are in the middle of Reagan's first term as president and Jameson is writing his major book of the 80s while studiously ignoring the political movements around him. What is going on? What is he afraid of?

To return then to some of the initial questions I raised.

First, postmodernism, in the broad sense is the art of our time, it is international (at least in urban third world)

the period of digital reproduction, of the copy of a copy...of audio sampling and xeroxing, and scanned images being processed and recollaged and produced

the dominance of the image in culture--the end of the print media as dominant, visual media as now dominant--nonverbal communication becomes more important.

it is a result of the collapse of high art and mass commercial art into the same cultural sphere

breakdown of genre distinctions, mixing of modes (fiction/nonfiction; documdrama, trash news ("gut news") America's Most Wanted, A Current Affair, Entertainment Tonight

it rests on eclecticism, fragmentation and reappropriation of mediated material

it can be simply superficial and slick (as can realism or modernism) it can be assimilated to the dominant values (Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass)

and it can be used in a critical and politically motivated way pointing to social change. But then we have to look at what areas are actually in motion, where change is a strong potential or actually happening. (ACT UP, abortion rights, anti-censorship of arts, etc.)

the special powers of political postmodernism

1. where people need information and analysis, especially as an alternative to the dominant media, and a desanctifying of the typical "authority" of the dominant
2. ability to shift emotional registers dramatically: going far beyond "cool"; ability to take on vastly different materials in vastly different contexts and still make cultural sense, to produce meaningful commentary, critique of culture and an enjoyable experience at the same time (especially with the acceptance of humor as part of the basic working of the mode)

some examples:

Fernando Birri, **My Son Che**

Marlon Riggs, **Tongues Untied**

show: **MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT** clips

a) censorship clips at ICAIC

b) "the truth is in the group"--a political appropriation of the image material, a returning it to History (this film is also about urban space and cognitive mapping)

show: **SCENES FROM THE MICROWAR** (Ernie Larsen, Sherry Millner)clip
dinertable countdown--the logic of living pop culture fantasies, critique of the the
rightwing notion of the family

show: **UNBIDDEN VOICES** clip (Parasher, Ellis)

SPICES segment and discussion of women/representation; appropriation from
mass culture.